



Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin  
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## **The Influence of Education on Civic Engagement: Differences Across Canada's Rural-Urban Spectrum**

*Neil Rothwell and Martin Turcotte, Statistics Canada*

### **Highlights**

- **Individuals at all levels of educational attainment are more likely to volunteer if they live in rural than urban areas, but this is particularly evident for those with a high school diploma or more.**
- **Close to four out of five individuals with a university degree who live in rural areas close to a major urban centre are members of at least one organization such as a political party, sports organization or cultural group.**
- **In terms of political participation, rural university degree holders are more likely to be active than those from urban areas.**
- **Public meeting attendance is higher in rural areas and the difference between rural and urban residents in this regard is similar at all educational levels.**

### **Introduction**

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specifically, the bulletin will probe whether individuals with lower or higher levels of education are more likely to be civically engaged if they live in a rural or an urban area. Although noted in an earlier study (Bollman and Biggs, 1992), this study presents the first detailed assessment of how the education level/civic engagement nexus is influenced by the rural/urban setting.



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Neil Rothwell and Martin Turcotte, Statistics Canada

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- In terms of political participation, rural university degree holders are more likely to be active than those from urban areas.
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Agriculture Division, Statistics Canada  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0T6

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This analysis uses Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS), cycle 17 data (Box 1, page 15) to examine the impact of education level on various dimensions of social engagement and social participation and how this impact varies across the rural-to-urban gradient (see Box 2, page 15, for an explanation of the educational level and social engagement categories, and Box 3, page 16, for a definition of rural and urban used in this analysis).

## **Background**

This bulletin builds on three previously separate findings concerning Canadian civic engagement, level of education and the rural/urban setting:

1. Educational attainment tends to be higher in urban Canada compared to rural regions. For example, a previous study by Alasia (2003) showed that, in 1996, the share of individuals aged 25 to 54 years with some post-secondary education was higher in Canada's predominantly urban regions than in rural regions. Meanwhile, the incidence of individuals aged 25 to 54 years with less than a grade nine level education was lower in predominantly urban regions than in rural regions.

2. While many factors are associated with social engagement, the level of education has been shown to be one of the most important determinants in previous research (Putnam, 2000). For example, in a study of the distinctive traits shared by active volunteers, Statistics Canada (2000) found that there was a "civic core" of volunteers in Canada and one of their most distinctive characteristics was being "well-educated." In a cross-national study of organizational involvement including data from 32 countries, Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas (2001) identified the level of education, along with employment status, as the most important individual characteristics predictive of association membership. Moreover, a recent analysis of the GSS cycle 17 data identified strong correlations

between the level of education and political participation, organizational involvement and social trust (Schellenberg, 2004).

3. In a previous *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin*, Turcotte (2005) found that although rural and urban residents of Canada were similar in many aspects of their social life, there were some differences. For instance, there was significant variation across the rural-to-urban gradient related to the incidence of volunteering, participation in public meetings and membership or participation in a service club or fraternal organization.

This analysis brings together these three separate findings and investigates whether the rural/urban differences, or absence of differences, identified by Turcotte can be understood, at least in part, by a possible interaction effect between the level of education and the place of residence. More simply, this study asks: do Canadian rural citizens with a higher level of education contribute more in terms of civic engagement than their city cousins who have a similar level of education? Alternatively, do rural citizens with less formal education "pick up the slack" and contribute more to civic engagement in a milieu where fewer individuals have higher educational attainment.

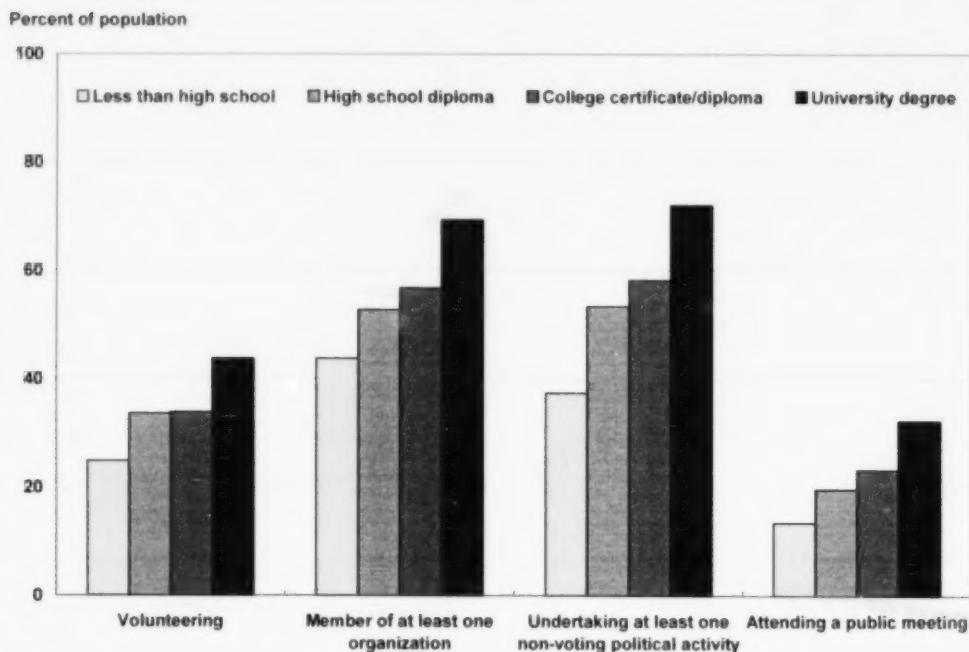
In this study, the likelihood of an individual with a given level of educational attainment in a given rural/urban setting to experience and/or engage in some form of social engagement was compared to individuals with the same level of education but living in a different type of area. The goal of these comparisons is to establish, for instance, if individuals with a university degree who live in a rural area are more likely to be civically active than those with a university degree who live in an urban setting.

## Civic engagement in Canada: level of education and the rural/urban setting

There is a strong and positive association between the level of education and the four indicators of

civic engagement selected in this study (volunteering, membership of at least one organization, non-voting political activity and public meeting attendance) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Social engagement was higher for individuals with higher levels of educational attainment, Canada, 2003**

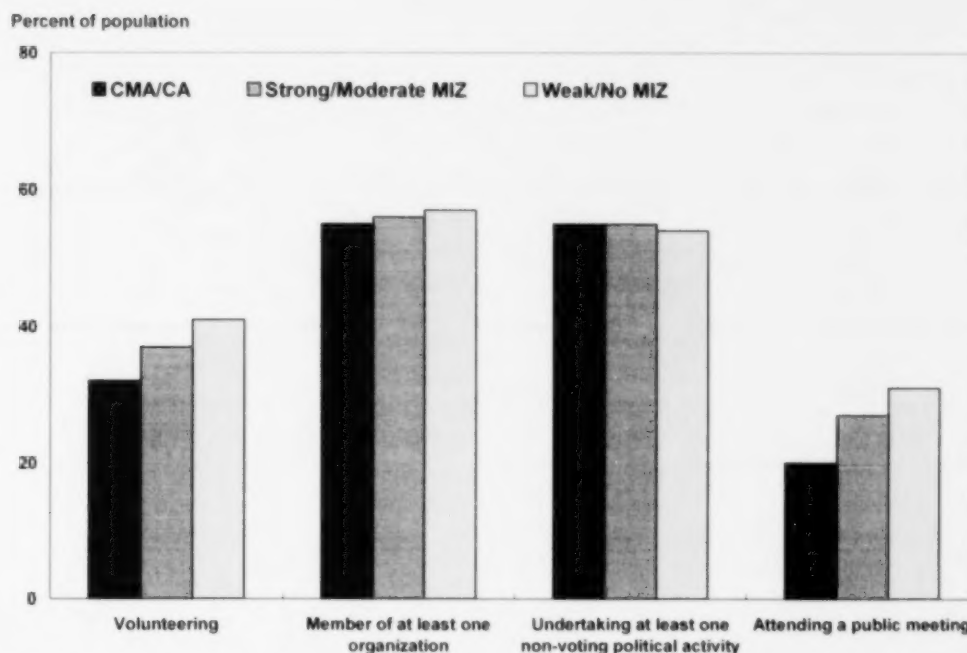


Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003

With some of these indicators, rural regions are at an advantage compared to more urban places (Figure 2). In 2003, 41 percent of individuals living in a Weak/No Census Metropolitan Area and Census Agglomeration Influenced Zone (MIZ) reported that they had volunteered in the past twelve months, compared to 32 percent of individuals living in a Census Metropolitan Area (CMA)/Census Agglomeration (CA). Also, 31

percent of residents in Weak/No MIZ said that they had attended a public meeting in the last year compared to 20 percent of urban residents. For the two other important indicators of civic engagement however, i.e. participation in at least one organization and involvement in at least one type of non-voting political activity, there was no appreciable difference between rural and urban regions.

**Figure 2 The likelihood of “volunteering” and “attending a public meeting” was higher for individuals living in a more rural zone, Canada, 2003**

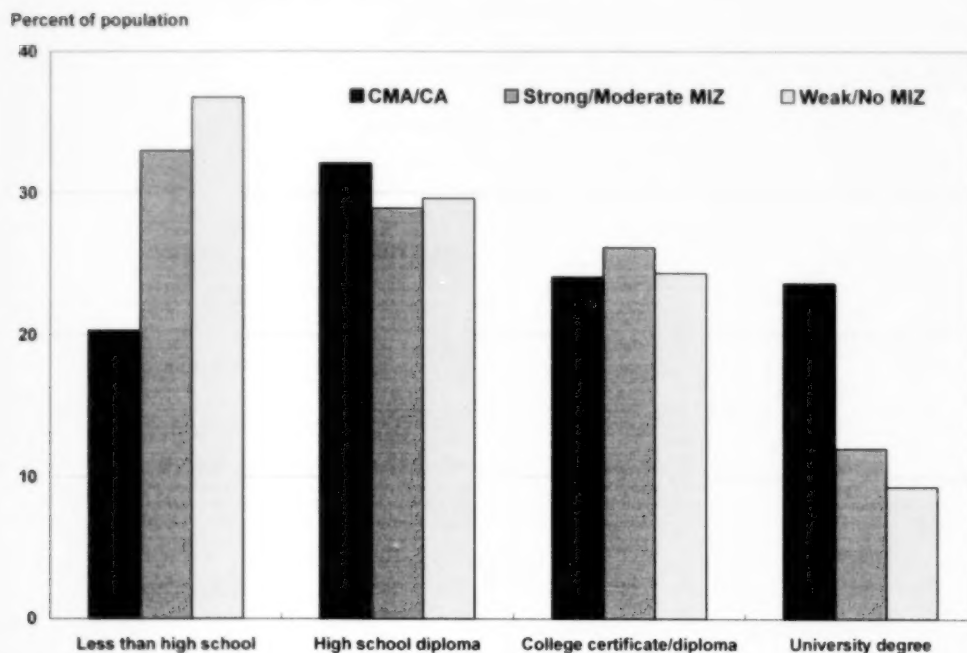


Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003

Rural areas have a lower share of individuals with higher levels of education attainment (Figure 3). Twenty-four percent of individuals who lived in urban areas hold a university degree. In contrast, this was the case of only 9 percent of individuals

in Weak/No MIZ and of 12 percent of those in Strong/Moderate MIZ. At the same time, the proportion of individuals without a high school diploma was greater in rural than in urban areas.

**Figure 3** The share of the population with “Less than high school” was higher in rural regions while the percent of population with a “University degree” was higher in urban areas, Canada, 2003



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003

Thus:

- Civic engagement is strongly associated with individuals with higher levels of education attainment (Figure 1);
- Rural areas have a higher share of individuals participating in community networks (specifically,

volunteering and attending public meetings) (Figure 2).

- Rural areas have a lower share of individuals with higher levels of education attainment (Figure 3).

These results appear somewhat contradictory. Given that rural areas have lower levels of educational attainment, and that lower levels of

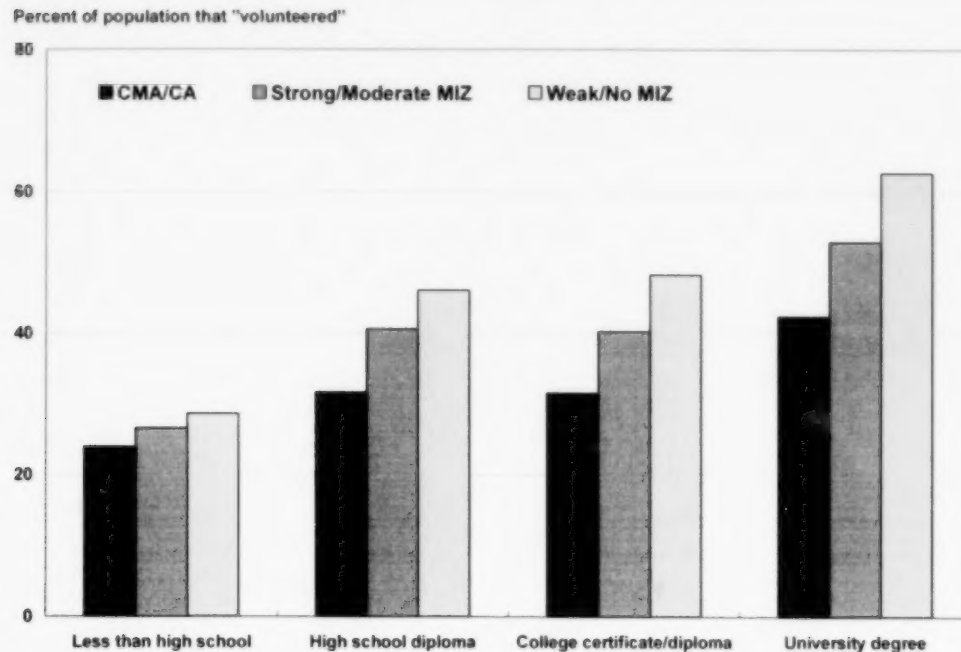
educational attainment are generally associated with reduced civic engagement, it might be expected that there *would* be less civic engagement in rural regions of Canada. By extension, it might be expected that volunteering, organizational involvement and political participation would be *less* prevalent in rural

## **Volunteering**

In all types of areas, there is a strong and positive relationship between the level of education and the likelihood of volunteering; Canadians with a university degree were more likely to have volunteered in the past year than those who did not complete high school, no matter where they lived (Figure 4). For each level of educational attainment, residents of rural areas were more likely to have volunteered than residents of urban areas. However, the difference between Canada's rural and urban residents was less pronounced at the lower end of the educational attainment gradient than at the upper end. In 2003, 29 percent of individuals who did not complete high school and who lived in Weak/No MIZ engaged

in volunteer activities, compared to 24 percent of their urban counterparts. That gap between urban and rural residents was wider in higher educational attainment groups. For instance, 63 percent of individuals who had a university degree and who lived in a Weak/No MIZ reported that they had volunteered. This was 21 percentage points higher than the 42 percent of individuals who also had a university degree but who lived in urban areas. In other words, individuals at all levels of educational attainment were more likely to have volunteered if they lived in rural compared to urban areas, but this was particularly evident for those with a high school diploma or more.

**Figure 4 Within each level of educational attainment the share of those who volunteered was higher in zones that were more rural, Canada, 2003**



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003

The strength of the association between education and volunteering was also stronger in Canada's rural areas. Specifically, the proportion of university degree holders living in Weak/No MIZ who volunteered (63 percent) was 2.2 times higher than the proportion of those without a high school

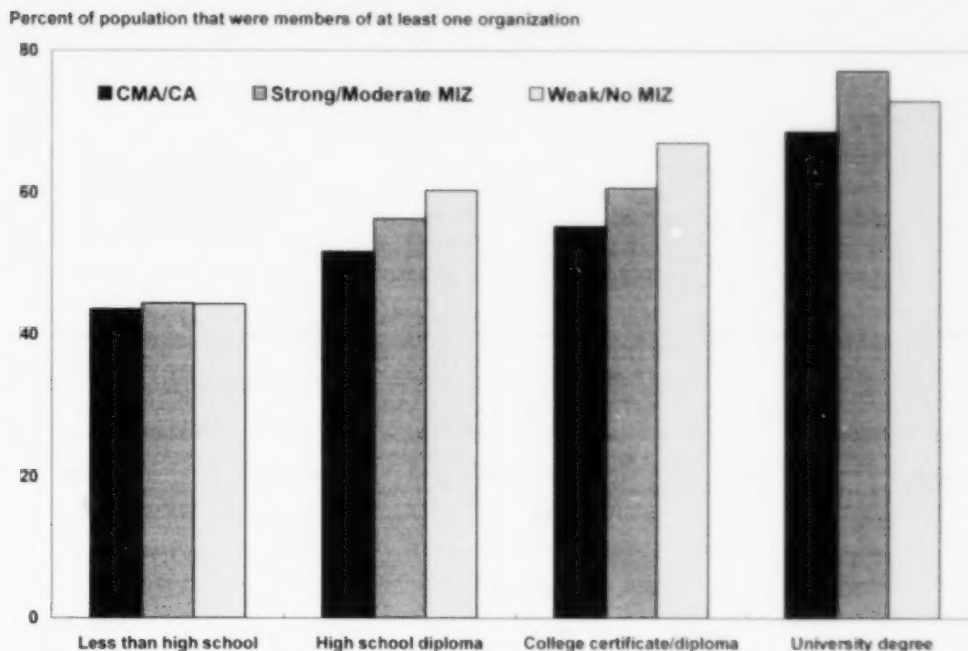
diploma also living in Weak/No MIZ (29 percent). In contrast, the likelihood of a university degree holder living in an urban area volunteering was 1.8 times higher than that of an urban resident who did not complete high school (42 percent and 24 percent, respectively).

## Organization membership

The association between the place of residence and organizational involvement varies across the different levels of educational attainment. There is no association between place of residence and

participation in an organization for Canadians without a high school diploma. Therefore, individuals who did not complete high school are equally likely to be members or participants in at least one organization no matter where they lived (Figure 5).

**Figure 5** Those with "High school diploma" and "College certificate/diploma" were more likely to be a member of at least one organization in rural areas, Canada, 2003



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003

However, the proportion of members in organizations is higher and does vary along the rural/urban spectrum for those with a high school diploma or more. For instance, 67 percent of Weak/No MIZ residents with a college certificate or diploma reported that they were a member of an organization, compared to 55 percent of those

living in a CMA/CA. Individuals who had a university degree and who lived in Strong/Moderate MIZ had the highest likelihood of involvement. In 2003, close to four out of five of them were members or participants in at least one organization.

## Political involvement

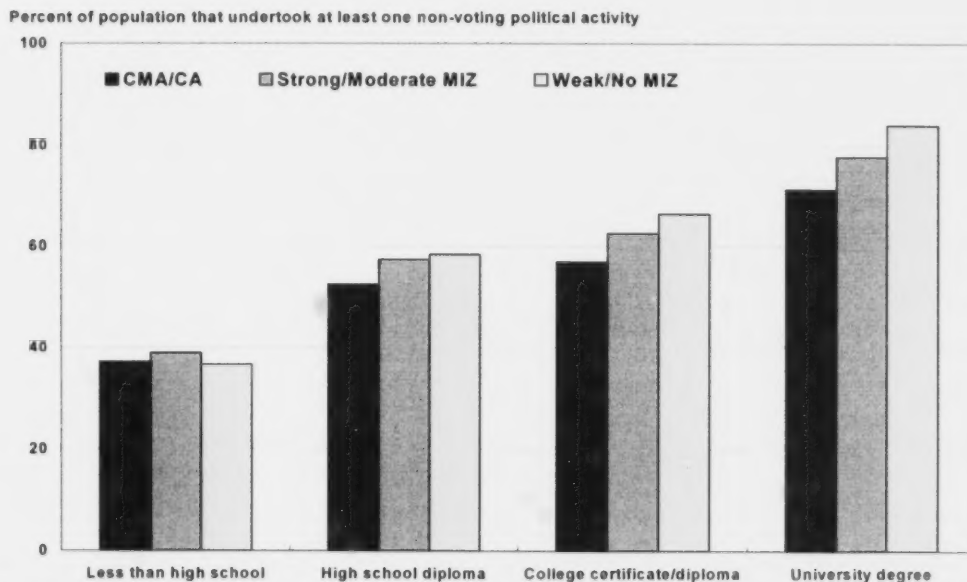
There is a strong association between level of education and non-voting political participation (for example, participating in a demonstration, signing a petition or contacting a politician/newspaper to express views). This correlation was once again stronger in rural than in urban areas.

Among individuals living in Weak/No MIZ, those who had a university degree were 2.3 times more likely to have been engaged in at least one type of non-voting political activity than those without a high school diploma (84 percent and 37 percent, respectively) (Figure 6). In contrast, the proportion of those with a university degree who lived in urban areas and who were involved politically was 1.9 times greater than those without a high school diploma also living in a CMA/CA (71 percent and 37 percent, respectively). Put

another way, in terms of non-voting political participation, there is a greater difference amongst university degree holders than amongst those who did not complete high school when rural and urban regions are compared.

The association between the place of residence and political activity was similar to that observed for volunteering and organizational involvement. While there was little difference between rural and urban dwellers among those with the lowest levels of educational attainment, there were significant cleavages in other categories. It was especially the case among those who had a university degree. Among this group, 71 percent of those living in a CMA/CA were involved in at least one type of political activity, compared to 78 percent of those who resided in a Strong/Moderate MIZ and 84 percent of those living in a Weak/No MIZ.

**Figure 6 Among those with a university degree, the likelihood of undertaking one non-voting political activity was higher among individuals living in zones that were more rural, Canada, 2003**



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003

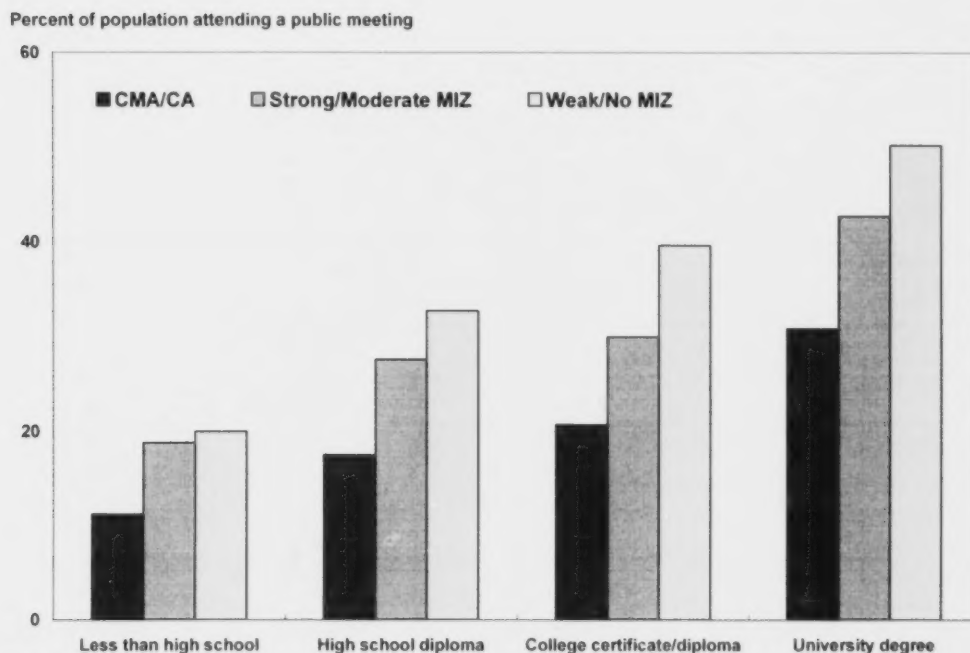
## Public meeting attendance

As shown in Figure 2, residents of Canada's more rural places were more likely to have attended a public meeting than those residing in urban areas. A reason for this could be that living in smaller places increases the likelihood of being heard at these public meetings, and, by extension,

influencing the decision-making process (Turcotte, 2005).

Canadians residing in Weak/No MIZ were most likely to have attended a public meeting at all educational attainment levels (Figure 7). Further, the gap between rural and urban residents was similar at all levels of educational attainment.

**Figure 7 Within each educational attainment group, the likelihood of attending a public meeting was higher for individuals living in zones that are more rural, Canada, 2003**



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003

Interestingly, residents of Weak/No MIZ who only had a high school diploma as their highest level of educational attainment were about as likely to have attended a public meeting as their urban counterparts who had a university degree. Quite

clearly, high rates of attendance at public meetings are more characteristic of rural than of urban places.

## **Conclusion**

It has long been known that educational attainment influences various aspects of social participation and civic engagement. What has not been investigated, however, is the impact of the rural/urban setting. The results of this investigation have revealed the differential impact that the rural/urban setting has on the educational level/civic engagement nexus within Canada.

In the introduction, it was asked: Do Canadian rural citizens with a higher level of education contribute more in terms of civic engagement than their city cousins who have a similar level of education? Or do rural citizens with less formal education "pick up the slack" and contribute more to civic engagement in a milieu where fewer individuals have higher educational attainment. Interestingly, the evidence presented in this study provides a measure of support for both interpretations.

Individuals with a university degree were more likely to be civically engaged if they lived in rural areas. This was particularly true in terms of volunteering and political involvement. While there are proportionally fewer university degree holders in rural Canada, it appears that they contribute more than would be expected from them if they followed the behaviour patterns of the "average" university degree holder. However, it also appears that individuals with less than a university degree (but with at least a high school diploma) are, in some ways, "picking up the slack." Individuals who had a high school diploma and a college certificate/diploma were more likely

to be civically engaged if they lived in rural areas. Moreover, in some cases, individuals with a lower level of education living in rural areas had a greater likelihood of civic engagement than those with a university degree living in urban settings. For instance, the share of those with both a high school diploma and a college certificate/diploma who volunteered in Weak/No MIZ was higher than those with a university degree in a CMA/CA. Therefore, it is not only those with the highest level of educational attainment, i.e. those with a university degree, who are high achievers in terms of civic engagement in Canada's rural areas. Interestingly, with the exception of public meeting attendance, the contribution to civic engagement by those with the lowest level of educational attainment, i.e. less than high school, were very similar in both rural and urban areas of Canada.

In summary, it can be seen that the rural/urban setting does influence the civic engagement/educational level nexus, at least in terms of the propensity to engage in the four indicators of social engagement used in this study. These results could have implications for the future of civic engagement in rural Canada. Individuals who have a high school diploma or more are more likely to be civically engaged if they live in rural regions of Canada. Therefore, if the educational attainment level of the rural population could be raised to that of the urban population, it is possible that the aggregate level of rural civic engagement may significantly increase. This would have positive implications for community capacity building in Canada's rural areas.

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Neil Rothwell is an analyst in the Research and Rural Data Section, Agriculture Division and Martin Turcotte is an analyst in the Social and Demographic Statistics Branch, Statistics Canada.

### Box 1 The General Social Survey

The General Social Survey (GSS) is a Statistics Canada survey program that gathers data on social topics in order to monitor changes in the living conditions and well being of Canadians over time and to provide immediate information on specific social policy issues of current and emerging interest. Each year the GSS investigates a different social topic. The GSS does not include data from the three Territories. For more information on the GSS see Statistics Canada, 2004.

#### General Social Survey, Cycle 17 – Survey on Social Engagement in Canada

The data used in this bulletin was taken from Cycle 17 of the GSS. Conducted from February through December 2003, Cycle 17 was the first cycle dedicated to the topic of social engagement.

### Box 2 Education level and civic participation categories

Education category	Highest level of education
University degree:	Doctorate/masters/bachelor's degree.
College certificate/diploma:	Diploma/certificate from community college/cegep or trade/technical school.
High school diploma:	High school diploma; Includes those with some university /community college who have not graduated from these institutions.
Less than high school:	Some secondary/elementary schooling and those with no schooling.
Civic participation category	Full description
Volunteering:	Performed unpaid volunteer work for any organization within the last 12 months.
Member of at least one organization:	Membership of at least one of the following in the last 12 months: A political party or group; A sports or recreation organization; A cultural, education or hobby organization; A religious-affiliated group; A school group, neighbourhood, civic or community association; A service club or fraternal organization.
Undertaking at least one non-voting political activity:	Undertook at least one of the following in the last 12 months: Searched for information on a political issue; Volunteered for a political party; Expressed views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or a politician; Signed a petition; Boycotted a product or chose a product for ethical reasons; Attended a public meeting; Participated in a demonstration or march.
Attending a public meeting:	Attended a public meeting in the last 12 months.

### Box 3 Defining urban and rural geography

#### Urban

A **census metropolitan area (CMA)** has an urban core population of 100,000 and over.

A **census agglomeration (CA)** has an urban core population of 10,000 to 99,999.

Both CMAs and CAs include all neighbouring municipalities where 50 percent or more of the workforce commutes to the urban core.

#### Rural

**Rural and small town** areas are towns or municipalities outside the commuting zone of CMAs and CAs.

Rural and small town areas are disaggregated into four Census Metropolitan Area and Census Agglomeration Influenced Zones (MIZ) based on the size of commuting flows of the workforce to any CMA or CA. The **Strong MIZ** category comprises areas with a commuting flow of 30 percent or more. The **Moderate MIZ** category comprises areas with a commuting flow between 5 percent and 30 percent. The **Weak MIZ** category comprises areas with a commuting flow of more than 0 percent and less than 5 percent. The **No MIZ** category comprises those areas where no individuals commute to a CMA/CA. For further information on MIZ see McNiven *et al.* (2000).

In this bulletin the following categories were combined:

- 1) CMAs and CAs (referred to as CMA/CA) and used as a proxy for urban centres.
- 2) Strong MIZ and moderate MIZ categories (referred to as Strong/Moderate MIZ) and used as a proxy for those rural regions that have significant socioeconomic integration with urban centres.
- 3) Weak MIZ and No MIZ categories (referred to as Weak/No MIZ) and used as a proxy for more remote rural areas that have little socioeconomic integration with urban centres.

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